



# Isolation and Sexual Abuse

Rita K. Noonan, Ph.D.  
Division of Violence  
Prevention  
CDC

# Isolation

- Isolation is the idea of having limited or no access to rape and prevention education efforts
  - This is especially noted in underserved communities
- It is a **systemic and institutional** barrier rather than **personal or individual** problem

# Isolation

- Can take many forms
  - Geographic
  - Economic
  - Political
  - Social

# Isolation

- Geographic

- Limited access to health and human services such as clinics, hospitals or counseling due to lack of transportation or locality of services

- Economic

- Lack of resources at the community or individual level to address sexual violence as a problem

- Political

- Politically marginalized: vote less often, lack of awareness of legal rights; collusion in judicial system or community does not acknowledge sexual violence as a problem

- Social

- Marginalized or disenfranchised such as those who are homeless, poor or incarcerated; cultural barriers

# Isolation

- Isolation in and of itself contributes to how women experience violence
- There is little data supporting this concept. Most research links the outcomes of social isolation to sexual violence.

# Why Should We Consider Isolation

- Addressing Isolation as a barrier provides an opportunity to reach a number of communities and populations and increase sexual violence prevention
- Marginalized populations or underserved communities suffer worse health outcomes such as:
  - Infant mortality
  - Life expectancy
  - Morbidity

# Why Should We Consider Isolation

- Underserved communities are at a greater risk for exposure to violence and increased fear of violence
- Social isolation has been linked to poorer physical & mental health, and lack of political participation

# Links to Sexual Abuse

- Several studies suggest that low-income women are at greater risk, especially those with income below \$10,000
- Women of color exposed to more community violence, unemployment and substance abuse



# Social Isolation

## First time victimization

- Can exist in any setting
- Lack of social ties, friends, other networks of people who can lend support or who have access to resources or knowledge about prevention

# Social Isolation

- Not necessarily the strongest “risk factor” for sexual abuse for women
- Stronger evidence suggesting that it is a risk factor for childhood sexual assault
- Has been linked to violent victimization

# Social Isolation

## Revictimization

- Highly correlated with survival against future sexual abuse
  - Isolation is often a consequence of sexual abuse
- Sexual Abuse: increases risk of substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, association with deviant peers
  - These high risk behaviors may increase chances of re-victimization

# Links to Childhood Sexual Assault

- In addition to other risk factors for child sexual abuse (e.g., maternal functioning), social isolation of the family can increase risk, especially for assaults by non-family members
- In general, socially integrated families suffer less family violence (child abuse, domestic violence, etc.)

# Child Sexual Abuse

- This link may be particularly important since over 50% of reported sexual assaults occur before age 18

# Links to Perpetration

- Robust finding across many studies
- Prevention strategy: target boys/young men who are at high risk for many problems, that is who demonstrate certain behaviors
  - Low academic achievement
  - Low self-esteem
  - Social isolation